



CONVENTIONS OF CRIME GENRE IN INDIAN SHOWS: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SACRED GAMES AND MIRZAPUR

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ABSTRACT

The boundaries of the crime genre are fluid, dynamic and flexible. It explains the number of subgenres that have emerged out of the broader umbrella. There are multiple strong intertextual links between texts. Many crimes fiction texts have combined with other genres such as drama, action, romance and science to produce generic hybrids and because of the abundance of crime fiction, there is extreme variety within the genre. This includes texts that stay well within the conventions of the genre and those that push and blur the boundaries of the genre. With the rise in the content produced by streaming services and the digital boom that is being witnessed in India, the kind of content produced makes for an interesting study. Recently released Indian mafia and gangster-based shows Sacred Games and Mirzapur particularly become subjects for the study because while they evidently follow the codes and conventions of the crime genre, they open the debate about the limitations of the taxonomies of genres, the world of hybrid genres. A discourse analysis was conducted to observe how media texts may involve multiple combination of genres to form a sub-genre. These shows fit most aptly in the crime genre but also overlap with the conventions of the drama and action genre. It was observed that television texts remain important elements in the cultural practices of genres, and traditional narrative genres remain central for television and eventually form conventions that define the pieces that constitute the genre.

KEY WORDS: Genre, sub-genre, media texts, conventions, hybridization, Netflix, Amazon Prime, video-streaming.

1.0 INTRODUCTION:

On-Demand video-streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video were bound to catch the fancy of the Indian audience. One of the major reasons for the rise of both these services was the introduction of exclusive Indian original content in the form of TV-series on these platforms. Phantom Films' Sacred Games on Netflix and Excel Entertainment's Mirzapur on Prime, proved that content is truly king and that the Indian audience wouldn't mind the shift to smaller screens if the entertainment got bigger. As of April 4, 2019, Sacred Games and Mirzapur ranked 3 and 5 respectively on IMDb, on the basis of ascending popularity. They both belong to the crime genre and are over-taken only by one other show of the same genre that was released most recently, Delhi Crime. Sacred Games and Mirzapur make interesting subjects to study because these shows not only competed with each other but also created a face-off between global streaming giants Netflix and Prime in their battle to conquer the Indian market. It is also the right genre if one wants to tap the tastes of the Indian market and a global audience interested in an India that is increasingly confident on the world stage because Indian cinema can certainly boast about its portrayal of larger-than-life gangsters, criminals, notorious villains and convincing portrayals of Dawood Ibrahim, Haji Mastan, Manya Surve, etc. These shows were also successful because they feed the country's perennial appetite for seeing the murky underbelly of its society, provide an alternative to the Narcos' lovers with the grittier side of life outside the western world and also mark more milestones in the evolution of the Indian screen gangsters.

1.1 Theoretical frame work:

To understand or delve deeper into the concepts surrounding genre, Daniel Chandler's 'An Introduction to Genre Theory' is a must. According to him, genre is too restricting. The theory raises questions about whether genres are really 'out there' in the world or if they are merely the constructions of analysts and if there are finite taxonomy of genres or are they in principle infinite, but also emphasizes on the fact that whilst writing within a genre involves making use of certain 'given' conventions, every work within a genre also involves the invention of some new elements. According to Henry Jenkins, genre constantly 'breaks rules' as seen in evolving hybridization. Hybridization is now commonplace to maximize audience appeal but also to offer a unique selling point by appearing to break the rules. Jenkins expresses his idea although many see genre as a barrier that should not be crossed, he believes that this should not be the case as it limits creativity. He does not endorse the idea that exploring mixed conventions of different genres together may seem unnatural.

1.2 Literature review:

According to Janne Schill in Crime Fiction: The Big Sleep, The Real Inspector Hound, Anil's Ghost (2007), responders of the genre expect the text to deal with certain types of characters and plots and they are not expected to stray far from the formula. These expectations constitute as conventions of the genre. Conventions are not rules but assumptions that are made by the creator and the responder of the genre. A narrative framework, for instance, refers to a conventional way a story is set out. They help to establish a certain common ground between creators and responders. Conventions ensure that a particular set of attitudes is addressed

and a particular aesthetic effect is pursued. Creator, when reinventing, can break them for special effects. The nature of the genre can be both dynamic and fluid. Whether the nature is truly so is what the study also aims to seek. Sue Turnbull's TV Crime Drama defines the television crime drama genre as a television landscape since it first migrated from film and radio onto the small screen in the 1950s as it continued to attract large audiences even as the depiction of the crime, the perpetrators and the investigators may have changed. Her study tracks these changes and provide an analysis of the TV crime series as a genre by paying close attention not only to the nature of crime TV dramas themselves, but also the context of production and reception. Particular attention is paid to the transnational career of the television crime drama in Britain, American, Europe and Australia.

2.0 SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS:

The Indian web-series scene is still in its nascent stages and under development, the options to choose from are limited.

- Because this study takes into consideration only two shows from the Indian context, the sample size is limited.
- More shows from the same genre and sub-genre can be considered in future.
- The understanding of the study is confined in its geographic reach.
- Since the method of critical discourse analysis is qualitative and as a result, the decoding of the media texts can be subjective.

There can be diverse interpretation and explanations for how and why realisations in the discourse are produced.

2.1 Hypothesis:

Indian web-series such as Sacred Games and Mirzapur, stay well within the conventions of the crime genre but simultaneously, also push and blur the boundaries of the genre.

2.2 Aims and objectives of the study:

- To establish if the texts match the conventions of the crime genre
- To establish if the texts depart from the conventions of the crime genre
- To establish which conventions seem more like those of a different genre(s)
- To understand the dynamic and fluid nature of genre(s)
- To understand hybridization after drawing examples from the media texts in the research

3.0 METHODOLOGY:

The media texts – Indian web-series in the crime genre Sacred Games and

Mirzapur were selected from streaming platforms Netflix and Amazon Prime – from their rankings on the IMDb, on the basis of ascending popularity.

The purpose of this research is descriptive and qualitative – critical discourse analysis was performed after reviewing published research studies of Janne Schill in *Crime Fiction: The Big Sleep, The Real Inspector Hound, Anil's Ghost* (2007) and Sue Turnbull's *TV Crime Drama* (2014) on the crime genre.

Conventions from the above-mentioned studies were agreed upon as the identification markers for the analysis of the shows and special attention was paid to the narrative styles and structures, familiar motifs and images, storylines, mis-en-scene, formal and stylistic techniques, dialogues, actions.

Data analysis includes a breakdown for instances wherein the activation and alteration of generic categories takes place.

3.1 Discourse Analysis and Interpretation:

Initially, the codes and conventions of a genre were not prescriptive but since the Renaissance, the rules were subverted and new sub-genres continued to develop. The audience knows what to expect from the texts and the conventions help produce texts that are part of a complex process between responders and creators. A diverse genre is created when creators engage with the conventions as well as subvert them. Literally, conventions are generally accepted ways of constructing form and informing meaning in media products such as story principles, structure, character and story arcs, cause and effect and point of view.

Crime Fiction: The Big Sleep, The Real Inspector Hound, Anil's Ghost by Janne Schill (2007), a book on crime fiction in literature, explains conventions very well. While they may pertain to the world of books, they can also be used to make sense of modern crime television. Because *Sacred Games*, the show is adapted on a novel (Vikram Chandra's 2006 book by the same name) and is originally a work of literature, it is appropriate to use these conventions.

In sub-genres within the crime genre, evil pervades through all levels of society. For example, in the hardboiled sub-genre, there are murders and other crimes as a result of drugs, pornography, illegal gambling and blackmail, which are committed in a seedy underworld. For instance, characters Ganesh Gaitonde, Deepak 'Bunty' Shinde and Bollywood actors Zoya Mirza and Karan Malhotra, are all seen using drugs in the course of *Sacred Games*.

In *Mirzapur* too, Munna Tripathi and his friend, Compounder, are involved in multiple scenes where they are heavily abusing cocaine and other hard drugs. In fact, it is safe to call Munna a borderline addict. A lot of his violent reactions were an aftermath of drug use. In fact, there is unapologetic use of bloodshed, alcohol, drugs and illegal substances in both the series. Another common convention of this genre is that it encodes hegemonic values and ideologies. Gruesome graphics, non-obscure references to India's murky political history as well as contemporary political present and a clear indication of how religion is used as a tool to further communal tension in India are some of the highlights of *Sacred Games* and *Mirzapur*. The former heavily uses references to controversial political and religious moments in Indian history in its narrative. By running the parallel political commentary between Ganesh Gaitonde's ascent to a mafia kingpin and the Indian political history, *Sacred Games* showcases the cause-and-effect relationship between political decisions on a common man's life.

Media texts are constructed realities and modern TV crime shows prioritize the reconstruction of realism in order to appeal to audiences, particularly in their use of media language. In this show, a realistic description is sought with the use of archival footage, to show what India went through at the time. The series makes *The Emergency*, the *Shah Bano Case*, the *Babri Masjid demolition*, *Mandal Commission case*, legal sterilization scheme and *The Bofors Scandal* as part of its narrative in the parallel commentary. Realism is depicted even in the form of characterization. For instance, the character of Constable Katekar is heavily layered, making it humane and organic – he is a dedicated cop and loyal subordinate, a good guy who perhaps does not even realize that he is an Islamophobe and intolerant to immigrants. It is understood in the subplot wherein his racism towards a Bangladeshi immigrant costs a person's life. Similarly, *Mirzapur* maps a crime milieu that is fairly conventional to the gangster/mafia crime genre – a heinous don, his emasculated son, the two overambitious brothers, the don's army of loyal foot soldiers, the power struggle between rival gangs. Although not as non-obscure, *Mirzapur* too encodes hegemonic ideas and ideologies in its way of weaving a contemporary socio-political reality in which the character of Akhandanand Tripathi or Kaleen Bhaiya, emerges as a symbolic projection for a ruler of a State. Firstly, Tripathi is a surname associated with upper caste Brahmins in North India. Moreover, *Mirzapur*, has a notable Muslim genealogy. A unique review on *Movie Mahal* believes *Mirzapur* is a microcosm of a ruler of a state. Kaleen Bhaiya, an authoritarian ruler of a city, maintains order in the city with a reign of terror but is has incredible diplomacy and tact. The otherwise benign demeanour of Kaleen Bhaiya invokes the media friendly image cultivated by the ruler. Ideologically, the coding of a Brahmin gangster ruling over a Muslim-named city holds a denotation that ties in with the figure of Maqbool, the loyal right hand of Kaleen Bhaiya, a Muslim was brought into the fold of the family, yet another metaphor for political appeasement used to neutralize anti-Muslim sentiments. There is also a certain lawlessness in *Mirzapur* that can be

metaphorical too – the state barely has real power over the city, and is ruled over by the liminal figure of the gangster. The police are bought off and the Chief Minister is antagonized in an attempt to show Bhaiya as somebody who poses a threat to the prevailing social order.

The two series have similar takes on masculinity. Crime gangster films or television can be read as a commentary on masculinity but *Mirzapur*'s hierarchy of masculinity is overall, the toxic kind. Throughout the series, there are multiple examples of interrelated male anxieties. Guddu Pandit is obsessed with building the perfect body so that he can enter the Mr. Purvanchal competition and eventually resorts to steroids that take a toll on his health. Patriarchal Kaleen Bhaiya uses his wife only for sex with no emotion involved. She eventually has an affair with her male servant that Kaleen Tripathi's wheelchair bound father, Satyanand Tripathi, finds out about and uses to sexually torture not just his daughter-in-law Beena but also the servant by asking her to dismember his genitals. Munna Tripathi, on multiple instances, fails to handle rejection and ends up retorting to violence because of repeatedly failing to woo Guddu's future wife. He is also seen engaging in violent and abusive sex with his female servant and a sex worker. Contrast that to *Sacred Games*' Gaitonde, who is relatively secure when it comes to have an intimate relationship with Cuckoo, a transgender woman and is deep in love with her. However, that is not a complete reflection of his character because he is seen in an aggressive form in the relationship with his wife Subhadra because of 'temporary impotency'. In both cases, however, the audience is made to believe that the abuse and aggression is an acceptable form of intimacy. Gaitonde is still a layered character when it comes to understanding masculinity but an outright toxic depiction of masculinity is the one displayed by Bunty's character – frustrated, bigoted, misogynist, abusive and predatory – in his actions and words.

Another marker of the conventions of the crime genre is also that a sense of danger is present, due to the presence of dark, mysterious places and dangerous characters with weapons such as guns, knives and bombs. The mis-en-scene in both shows includes urban places with dodgy streets and dingy alleys, specific hiding spots or lavish villas, police stations and court rooms. Indian content, across genres, has an obsession with hygienic clean spaces, even though the country is not clean. However, both shows are realistic in that sense and true to the convention. The stories take place in a detailed and interesting setting, which draws considerable research or the creators own experience. The hard-boiled sub-genre, for instance, presents the city as a dangerous place with seedy bars, nightclubs and cheap hotel rooms. The city in the backdrop represents empty modernity, death and corruption *Mirzapur* aims to show a monarchy masquerading as a democracy and it fits best in UP, the heartland of India that is specifically known for communal, casteist and criminal violence.

Similarly, in *Sacred Games*, the focus is the murky Mumbai underbelly that has similar undertones but with contrasts. There's the darkness of poverty in the slums and the realities of the lower middle-class but there's also small amounts of the glitter and glamour of Mumbai's rich and wealthy. In both the shows, the city is not just the backdrop of the story, but rather a central and tangible element of it. They are neither shot in the studios nor shot in London, America or Switzerland – clean places but in the realistic India. They are filmed in urban places as well as interiors of villages, bustling streets, dump yards and industrial wastelands. The violence is not filmed in sparkling locales but in red light areas and the seediest dives, often in late hours of the night.

While *Mirzapur* is said to be Amazon Prime's response to *Sacred Games*, it is also accused of copying *Sacred Games*' success formula and Anurag Kashyap's style of auteurism. In genre cinema, the willingness to repeat the standard repertoire of elements is part of the audience pleasures of having our expectations fulfilled. A great genre work is said to reinvent and innovate or add something we may have not encountered before and that explains why *Mirzapur* looks like it has taken a leaf out of Kashyap's *Gangs of Washeypur* book. *GOW* will remain synonymous to the desi gangster genre and many genre pieces rightly aim to reach that standard but falter and end up looking like washed-up versions of that universe minus the auteur's nuance and flamboyance. But here's where it gets interesting – the points at which *Mirzapur*'s plot falters are where we get to see that the show is within the conventions of the genre but also blurs or pushes its boundaries. The story could have made a meaningful statement about an upsetting reality, instead, it glorifies certain aspects of the UP-gangland culture in its attempt to 'dramatize' crime. Everyone in *Mirzapur* is corruptible when money is dangled before their faces, and since there's no point in standing up for what is right, one might as well make some money doing what is wrong. That is best understood in the characters of brothers Guddu and Bablu Pandit. Even though Bablu seemed to have a stronger moral compass, at no point is the audience left actively latching on to him, because for him too, being bad is good. One is a bad guy and the others are competing to be worse. It can't be categorized as a bad thing but it can affect the show if there isn't even a single character to root for because the show is left with no option but to revel in the over-the-top and mostly unnecessary violence. Even for stories with antagonists as the lead, the audience seeks a hero. The hero might be a bad guy but to make a compelling point but he is of utmost importance as was the case in *Sacred Games* where Gaitonde successfully became the hero despite being a negative character. The same cannot be said about Guddu in *Mirzapur*, yet.

One of the most commonly agreed upon conventions of the genre is that although

crime fiction deals with corruption and violence, the message is usually moral. Conventions of the genre express the importance of good triumphing over evil, the need for law to be upheld, and the criminal being brought to justice. However, Mirzapur lacks that moral centre narratively. That can be attributed to the extreme tone of the show – the acting, the emotions, the dialogues and every scene. For instance, when the faulty katta ends up blowing up in the hand of a man being forced to test it, we are made to see the palm separating from the hand. We are also made to see Bablu throwing up when he is shown the intestines spilling out a man killed by Kaleen's men. When Munna expresses desire to do some drugs, he ends up abusing cocaine, joints and heroin together but still survives. The freehand while directing in an attempt to show gory blood-realism lacks realistic action. Although Sacred Games does a better job at unravelling the moral dilemma in the audience's mind, its tone is quite extreme as well. The lack of coherent violence is understood in the first scene itself – the point of showing a Pomerian thrown off a high-rise is jarring. It is followed by Gaitonde shooting a grievously wounded woman in the face. That tone continues throughout the series. For instance, there is an important and gruesome scene where Sartaj Singh gets his thumb chopped off by Malcolm Murad, a sinister terrorist. The iconic use of weaponry, hand guns, banks, police cars, uniformed and ununiformed police, and explosions is a trademark of the genre but on multiple occasions the shows try to make you believe visual flamboyance is when blood spatters on the camera each time a throat is slit, a bullet pierces through someone's head or a shell is emptied into an innocent civilian. Robbery, heists, murders, bombings and shootings are common practice in this genre and both these shows supply that in copious amounts. These constructed versions of reality are made to appeal to the audiences through emotions despite gory use of violence, sex and unlawful, corrupt or morally wrong activities and the presence of gaudy mobsters, sassy molls, crooked politicians and cops. It is exactly why it is difficult to place these two shows in a specific sub-genre even though they correspond most to the mafia/gangster crime sub-genre. They include everything - gangsters, cops, politicians, drugs and substance abuse, Bollywood, murder, sex, gun running, fake encounters, communal riots, counterfeit currency, espionage, politicians, and even nuclear terrorism as issues. There is also heavy amounts of drama and operative violence making them overlap with the wide genre of drama and action. Another main feature of the genre is that the main characters have a background story such as a difficult past, a problematic, abusive upbringing, or belong to broken home, or are orphans. Gaitonde's character in Sacred Games fits this description like a glove. He has had a problematic upbringing and a difficult past and that narrative is what makes the creators dramatize and glorify his ascent to a mafia that is feared so heavily. We can also use this description to explain bits of Munna's character in Mirzapur – he is an emasculated son of a renowned politically diplomatic kingpin who is a desi modification of the spoilt brat stereotype. He is overambitious and hot-headed and it can be traced back to his insecurities about fitting into his father's shoes and being a good successor. As a result, his relationship with his step-mother is not great either. He is constantly reminded of how inept he is and that is also one of the reasons why the friction between him and the capable Pandit brothers increases. It is also reflected in his treatment of his subordinates in business and college, his substance abuse and abusive sex life. While the convention of detectives or cops usually being strong, independent characters that can often have difficulties with human relationships is one that we have seen in this genre for long, as seen in shows from the West like *The Wire*, *Hill Street Blues*, *The Sweeney*, *Inspector Morse* or even *Sherlock Holmes*. Sartaj Singh's character makes for interesting observation. This cop is anything but mentally strong, but you still want to root for him because of the innate goodness and often, naivety. While Mirzapur lacks that one good character you want to root for, Sacred Games has that in the form of Sartaj, even though the reason we root for him - his moral righteousness - is also his weakness. Heroes in Hindi feature films and TV shows are not "weak" but Sartaj is not your typical hero. He is an anxious, pill popping, overthinking cop, dejected by his personal and professional life, bullied by his bosses, locked in a profession offering him little growth. He is the projection of an average Indian man. However, even though, Anjali Mathur's character is not a cop per se, she is a RAW agent. She fits the original convention better.

One of the biggest takeaways from both these shows that helps this study is that both these shows kill their main characters. Not many crime shows have risked killing their main characters in the first season or instalment of the show itself – Sacred Games and Mirzapur can boast of that, though. The fact that Ganesh Gaitonde shoots himself is revealed in the first episode itself, the rest of the series progresses in a way that Gaitonde narrates the story before his death. Anjali Mathur also dies within the first instalment of the series and Sartaj Singh comes pretty close to death himself. Although a supporting actor, Katekar's death wasn't as surprising, but it helps create the tension in the minds of the audience that one of the few "good guys" is killed – inevitably, creating the image that in this grey and complicated world of crime, goodness can get you killed. Similarly, the last episode in Mirzapur is a massacre at a wedding and is almost as if the creators, apart from Gangs of Wasseypur, have also taken out a leaf from Game of Thrones' in an attempt to replicate the impact of Red Wedding or Rains of Castamere scene in their finale episode to dramatize the show. The death of Bablu and Guddu's pregnant wife, Sweetie is eerily similar to the death of the prominent Starks wherein Robert Stark, his pregnant wife Talisa and mother Catelyn Stark are brutally killed.

4.0 RESULTS:

It can be concluded that television texts remain important elements in the cultural practices of genres, and traditional narrative genres remain central for television and eventually form conventions that define the pieces that constitute the genre. While these shows stay well within the conventions of the crime genre, they simultaneously push and blur the boundaries of the genre. This conclusion is reached upon after agreeing that although genres are strategically articulated by the industry but the audiences bring a range of generic frameworks to bear on their reception of texts as well. The desire for conventions can be linked to the human need for order, peace and security. While the conventions are ordered, thus providing security, but like prevalent in the crime genre, they also contain symbols of danger, uncertainty, violence and sex, providing excitement. Even though the crime fiction is imaginary, it can still provide a sense of realism, and at the same time be predictable and formulaic. This explains that even though Mirzapur was badly received by critics, the audience will be looking forward to its second season because the show corresponded to the expectations of the crime genre that guarantee excitement.

Sacred Games, too, despite its shortcomings has been able to tap into the Indian audience because of corresponding to the conventions and also providing a sense of realism, even if it is a work of fiction. Moreover, both the shows were able to offer something new to the audience that had already been exposed to a lot of gangster and mafia sub-genre media texts in the past but has new elements to look forward to in the next instalments of the show. It can also be attributed to the Henry Jenkin's theory on the hybridization of genre that encourages subversion of genre. Schill (2014) stresses upon the observation that the subversions can be well received by audiences if they add interest, surprise, a new perspective or a fresh idea but may also reject it if they feel that the very reason that they are engaging with the genre piece is absent or not dominant.

The success of the text is also dependent upon how well the creator is able to revive the otherwise archetypal and stereotypical characters and plots yet reinvent something new. In the case of both these shows, it is safe to say that the popularity, reviews, ratings and the renewal for a second season have shown that the audiences accepted the shows even if many conventions were subverted. In all likelihood, it is because the dominant conventions still belonged to the genre the shows belonged too. It is also possible that the combination of the crime, drama and action genre is a generally better received one. What also adds to the success apart from the two aspects in that it belongs to the Mafia/Gangster sub-genre that is a well-received one in India too. These three factors constitute to the success of the show. Conventions are linked to the context of the work, as society and culture changes, so do conventions.

In fact, that is precisely why genre must constantly be reinvented and the agreed upon conventional boundaries must be crossed; they must appeal to the changing values of the responders. These values are closely linked to the changing genre demarcations. Moreover, I am in agreement with Schill, and that it is in, fact when conventions are broken that the reader becomes more aware of them. A reader's understanding of the crime genre conventions, for instance, is developed from reading or watching other examples of the genre, knowledge of the schools of crime genre, the sub-genres and knowledge of a particular creator's style. The reading of the genre can also be defined by what we see on screen (drama, action) as opposed to what is the perceived formula.

Sue Turnbull (2014) furthered Lex Cooke's discussion from *The Television Genre* book that a sweep of crime dramas under the Police Series overlapped with shows under the Action Series. It is best to regard a genre as an unstable category based on cultural assumptions that are constantly evolving. Graeme Turner's phrase, "promiscuous hybridity" is therefore particularly apt for the crime genre which has always borrowed and blurred generic categories. Hybridization can be best understood in Turnbull's (2011) study of how shows like *The Wire* have been liked because they 'break the rules' of the genre. Hybridization within the genre has resulted in shows like teen-drama *Veronica Mars* and musical crime drama *Blackpool*. One of the statements from the same book that have been most important in this study was: "...since for every claim that is made about genre, an example can be found that contradicts it. Indeed, it is hard to make an encompassing statement about the genre as a whole since any long-running crime drama shows may have different writers, producers, and/or directors, each with their own vision of how the basic formula may play put as they seek to maintain the attention of the audience."

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